



Why House Democrats are eager to force votes on doomed gun control bills

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A week after a [Senate filibuster forced a vote on gun control measures](#), Democrats in the House of Representatives are holding a sit-in on the House floor to try to get Republicans there to do the same.

"The time for silence and patience is long gone," Rep. John Lewis, the Georgia Democrat and hero of the civil rights movement who is leading the sit-in, said in a stirring speech Wednesday morning. "The American people are demanding action. Do we have the courage, do we have the raw courage to make at least a down payment on ending [gun violence in America](#)?"

But whether they get their vote or not isn't going to make any practical difference. Democrats are in the minority in the House, and the bills they favor don't have the support to pass. What's more, we *already know* this legislation doesn't have the 60 votes it would need to pass the Senate.

Beyond that, these measures are exceptionally modest as a policy matter — steps that even in a best-case scenario would do [barely anything to reduce gun violence in the United States](#). These modest ideas [poll well](#) but are unlikely to be big practical political winners, because [gun rights proponents are much more politically active on gun issues](#) than are proponents of gun control, who generally favor more regulation but do so in a low-key way.

Nonetheless, the very fact that we are having a political standoff over gun regulation this week is a substantial strategic victory for the Democrats — taking the politically dangerous events of the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando and at worst neutralizing them.

Democrats have worried that terrorism will help Trump

The possibility that [terrorist attacks might shift the electoral terrain in Donald Trump's favor](#) has been one of Democrats' biggest worries since Trump emerged as the presumptive Republican nominee.

In a dream world, of course, Democrats would like to think that focusing voters' attention on the prospect of national peril would lead them to reject an inexperienced and unqualified nominee. But many GOP elites had just such dreams last winter, only to see them shattered when the San Bernardino shootings only boosted the appeal of Trump's xenophobia.

More broadly, both experimental and real-world studies have tended to show that in the US and abroad, the major party with a more hawkish reputation usually benefits when international terror becomes a major concern.

For instance, Michael Koch, Laron Williams, and Jason Smith studied how quickly various parliamentary governments lost their majority coalitions after transnational terrorist attacks in [a 2012 paper](#). What they found was that right-leaning governments had an easier time holding on to power than left-leaning governments did. It seems the left gets more blame for terrorist attacks that occur under its watch.

Then there's evidence from Israel that indicates that terror helps the right at the ballot box. [Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor found](#) that a terror attack in an Israeli locality shortly before the election causes, on average, "an increase of 1.35 percentage points on that locality's support for the right bloc of political parties." And [Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff found](#) that after rockets are fired into areas of Israel, even if there are no casualties, support for right-wing parties spikes in those areas by 2 to 6 percent.

Shifting the argument to guns is a strategic win

In that context, focusing the political argument on gun regulation rather than on suspected Orlando shooter Omar Mateen's admiration for ISIS or questions around Muslim immigration to the United States is a strategic win. Democrats may not win many votes with thin-gruel, poll-tested gun control proposals, but they aren't going to *lose* any.

Last fall, by contrast, the American political system found itself gripped with [vague fears about Syrian refugees](#) that led to [state-level refugee bans](#) and [congressional legislation that scared vulnerable Democrats](#), as part of a [larger cultural trend toward Islamophobia](#).

That's perilous political terrain for Democrats, and the basic facts of the Mateen case suggested the possibility that the conversation would shift back into that mode.

A couple of popular-but-doomed and not-very-important gun control bills that the National Rifle Association and the Republican Party will filibuster to death, by contrast, is very safe ground for Democrats. Something they can talk about until the next thing comes up and the news cycle shifts.

